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Panchayati Raj as a tool for Democratic Culture of Governance: A Study of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

In the realm of freedom of expression and association India has already set-up very high standards though more is always being demanded to widen the horizon of what the people want and how much the government in consonance with the spirit of the constitution. In this context this paper seeks to analyse the scene of democratic governance in Arunachal Pradesh in the background of Panchayati Raj exercise in the state. The paper is divided into four sections: understanding the structural aspect of the Indian state vis-à-vis democratic governance; centre-state relationship defining and also redirecting the course of democratic governance practices; the experience in the tribal situations with focus on Panchayati Raj in Arunachal Pradesh and conclusion.

Key words: - *Democratic Governance, Panchayati Raj, Centre-state Relations, Tribal Situations, Freedom of Expression*

Introduction: The Indian state because of its peculiar structure of coexisting unitary and federal systems has been uniquely confronted with the challenge of democratic governance about the indispensable need of which it has been fortunately aware of right from its first days of formation as a democratic socialist republic. The consistent experiment with the centre states structure of cooperation has given the experience on the front of democratic governance. Complex questions to answer which various political parties have embarked upon innovative mechanisms of governance in order to be acceptable to the electorate. In this context, the instance of the tribal electorate in comparatively recently formed states like Arunachal Pradesh appears quite interesting to study.

Section-I

Understanding the structural aspect of the Indian state vis-à-vis Democratic Governance

Democratic Governance: The Concept: To understand democratic governance in India, we must consider contribution of the colonial rule in India. British Indian administration and governance was carried out by the Governor General. During freedom struggle there was pressure for popular government. The British government in response to it created legislatures at the provincial level with ministers and other elected officials, headed by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru in 1935. But there was no change in the situation. The powers of the Governors and the Governor General remained mostly unaffected due to this provision. The police or district administration retained complete control over administration. Only after independence, the law making power shifted to the elected representatives of various states and of the central level. However, the executive power is still exercised by both bureaucrats, and elected office bearers. To look at the local level, the elected representatives do not have any power as they don't have legislative role. They also don't have policy-making functions. The powers of the collector as the key authority at the district level are very wide. Such a hierarchical administrative system is not very transparent. Governance, hence, is faced with practical difficulties. Poor governance in the context of India is a problem and it has historical reasons.

In this context, it may be worth considering the three dimensions of Democratic Governance. These are aimed at answering the following basic questions for engaging with a wide range of laws, regulations, rules and procedures. The questions that are vital are as follows: How democratic has been the 'process' of arriving at these laws, regulations, rules and procedures?; How much do these laws, regulations, rules and procedures reflect 'popular sentiment and aspirations?; Are the objectives with which the laws, regulations, rules and procedures are framed truly reflected in their actual practice? Further, from the people's point of view democratic governance is understood as the capacity of a society and its citizens to adhere to the commonly accepted norms and principles. How important is self-regulation. How much is left to self-regulation? What are its implications for democratic governance?

Importance of Democratic Decentralization: Gandhi's concept of democratic decentralization is the resultant of his passionate belief in non-violence, truth and individual freedom. He calls it Panchayati Raj or village Swaraj. He wants to see each village a little republic, self-sufficient in its vital wants, organically and non-hierarchically linked with the larger spatial bodies and enjoying the maximum freedom of deciding the affairs of the locality. Gandhi wanted political power to be distributed among the villages in India. This democracy is based upon freedom. In the opinion of Gandhiji individual freedom could be maintained only in autonomous, self-reliant communities that offer opportunities to the people for fullest participation.

Panchayati Raj and Governance: The Rural Development Report 2016 shows that Inclusive Rural Transformation is the need of the hour, thus policymakers and development practitioners realise that it can be used to win the global war against poverty. This systematic and rigorous analysis of the rural sector gives a greater understanding of what key investments and policy reforms should be prioritized so that people and nations can benefit and transform rural areas in developing countries. The report highlights the significance of rural and agricultural development to overall economic growth. (<http://oneworld.net/updates/news/govts-urged-focus-targeted-policies-end-poverty> retrieved on 03-12-2016)

The governance realm can be considered in terms of six arenas:

I. civil society, or the way citizens raise and become aware of political issues; II. Political society, or the way societal interests are aggregated in the political process; III. Government, or the stewardship by the executive of the system as a whole; IV. Bureaucracy, or how policies are implemented; V. economic society, or the relationship between the state and the market; and VI. Judiciary or how disputes are settled.

The under-development question of tribal communities has to be a major governance issue for the central and state governments. There has been a colossal failure of the political establishment, in not being able to ensure basic dignity of living in the tribal community.

The continued inability of the governments to fulfil our pledges has led us to a situation where the credibility of any government assurance to a tribal is seriously questioned. Governance has to be very genuinely aware of this need.

Section-II

Centre-State Relationship defining and also redirecting the course of Democratic Governance Practices

Democratic Governance: Indian Context: Democratic Governance to a large extent helps in keeping the country together, in strengthening governmental administration, and improving the socio-economic conditions of the people. But, at the same time, the major sections of governance, namely the political administrators, the legislature, the judiciary, the civil services, and the civil society have to take the blame for many of the ills of society and the unfulfilled promises that we made to ourselves in November 1949 when we adopted the Constitution. Here it is important to mention the Preamble to the Indian Constitution in its original form:

“WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC, and to secure to all its citizens:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all;

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the Nation:

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.”

Governance in Indian context could be understood in both positive and negative terms.

The achievements of India in terms of Democratic Governance are as follows: In the realm of freedom of expression and association India has already set-up very high standards though more is always being demanded to widen the horizon of what the people want and how much the government in consonance with the spirit of the constitution.

India has in the field of politics and multiparty system of democracy the largest number of political parties that contest elections and also have vibrant debate on the floor of the parliament to accommodate issues and aspirations of the people.

To lubricate the governance machinery the steel frame of Indian democracy or the bureaucracy is in place with constant thinking reaffirming its necessity and also reform every now and then.

The fact that the President of India as the commander of national security forces and most importantly the army runs the country to all security of the people is a singular hallmark of the discipline that India enjoys.

As far as the negative aspects go, it is useful to concentrate on the Governance challenges in India. In particular, the policy priorities reflect an overarching concern that policy-making is rather divorced from the people and their interests. In many cases policy does not reflect public preferences. This leads to disenchantment and alienation. The low accountability of legislators to the public has made the people’s servants their masters. While democracy is widely seen to exist in regular elections across levels from villages as in Panchayati Raj to the state Assembly and Union Parliament being a powerful feature of Indian democracy to adumbrate about its effectiveness, in practice rampant malpractice on one hand in terms of money, muscle power and wine, and criticism of the credibility of the Election Commission of India in matters of neutrality and efficiency on the other are important darker aspects that any sensible evaluation of where India stands in terms of governance is bound to highlight to draw questions to India’s democratic governance edifice.

Democratic Governance: Issues and Solutions in the Indian Scene: A study reported by www.lokrajandolanobserves: Governance in India is in a complete mess. Information obtained under Right to Information law in several parts of the country reveals ghost roads, non-existent hand pumps and motors, etc. When people complain to authorities, no action is taken. The citizens have no control over government employees. An ordinary citizen has absolutely no workable remedy against failure or mismanagement of the government.

The Indian state in post-independent India came to play an active role in economic development and social change. Before the onset of liberal economic reforms in the early 1990s, the Indian economy was dominated by the public sector industries, which are considered to be its ‘commanding heights’. However, throughout the 1990s vehement

arguments were put forth attributing the slow rate of economic growth to the extended role of the state into economic activities and its enormous expenditure on subsidies and public services. Of course, soon it is realized that in a country like India, or for that matter in any country, state cannot withdraw from certain core areas including public services. The discourse of democratic governance to some extent brought the focus back on the development of the economy in such a way not to hurt the interests of the poorer sections and the marginalized.

Democratic Governance: Solutions to some of the most glaring problems: Governance should emphasise upon providing safe drinking water. Transport and telecommunications are among other areas for better equipping the personnel to meet the challenges of governance in India today.

Democratic governance should be directed towards eradicating corruption, ensuring transparency and accountability, tackling problems of unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, addressing the menace of a rising population etc. General awareness about e-Governance has to be created among the citizens as it helps for capacity building within the government.

Section-III

The experience in the tribal situations with focus on Panchayati Raj in Arunachal Pradesh

Performance of the Panchayati Raj bodies in the West Kameng District: The Panchayati Raj in the West Kameng District is taken here to explain the expectations of the people with regard to development planning under various government schemes and why the performance levels are as and how they are; to understand if people's participation is secured or not while making Panchayati Raj bodies function to achieve goals of development set before them; to arrive at an understanding of the nature and possibility of intervention necessary to drastically recast the performance patterns of the Panchayati Raj bodies to make them desirably responsive; and to form a comparative view of how the pattern of performance in West Kameng district matches with or significantly differs from that obtaining on an all-Arunachal and all-India basis.

The Purposive Sampling with Questionnaire-cum-interview schedule was used to collect the data to reach the findings. The total number of four Anchal Samities - Dirang, Kalaktang, Thembang and Thrizino in the West Kameng district taken for the sample area for conduct of the study. The Study has elicited views and insights of the village people and the Panchayati Raj functionaries about how the Panchayati Raj system has been working to make fruits of government development planning reach the villages. Also, observations from the respondents have been collected to offer an understanding of where and how problems of the villagers continue to remain unaddressed. From their own experiences of the functioning of the Panchayati Raj system in their GPs and from their expectations about

what the system promises to offer them in terms of qualitative change in their living conditions and about their awareness on the potential of the Panchayati Raj system to bring development to their backward rural settings in difficult hilly terrains, the respondents have offered suggestions which appear to have a role in bringing in changes necessary in the structural arrangements within the Panchayati Raj system so that the functional efficiency of the system increases and ultimately the benefit in clear and visible terms flows from the system itself to make the promises of the Constitution of India in its provisions related to Panchayati Raj from 73rd Amendment onwards reasonably realized.

Success of Panchayati Raj in the state of Arunachal Pradesh has largely been a result of a democratic culture of governance at the grassroots level: Panchayati Raj, in the opinion of respondents, can be successful through the following eight ways:

- 1) Democratic decision-making;
- 2) Effective mechanism for Development;
- 3) Effective Participatory and democratic mechanism;
- 4) Democratic and development oriented system
- 5) Efficient delivery of the goods in time bound manner;
- 6) Educated Panchayati Raj functionaries can better look after people's needs;
- 7) Ensuring people's participation through involved leadership and
- 8) Scope to achieve people's needs and demands in qualitative as well as quantitative terms.

However, there have been some very important suggestions for improvement of Panchayati Raj given by the people in Arunachal Pradesh who have seen Panchayati Raj functioning and have great expectations about the transformation it can bring to rural life:

Keeping the governance needs in view, the following few steps could be taken for the improvement of the Panchayat system –

- The GPMs should distribute the works among the villagers equally without any discrimination;
- The GPM and ASM should cooperate with each other and also with the villagers;
- For the development of the village the Panchayat has to be active in relation to its works and
- New faces should be introduced to allow more dynamic participation of educated and committed youth and the Panchayat members should listen to their points of views.
- More training programmes on inculcating awareness among the PRI functionaries about their powers and functions would create situation for effective dissemination of ideas at the level of the functionaries simply on the basis of their field experiences on people's expectations and demands from the government authorities, on responsibility and accountability, and also on the practical coordination needed to be struck at the levels of the PRIs, District officials, MLAs, MPs etc.

- Level and quality of deliberation at the Gram Sabha and further upward meetings could be better achieved through ensuring certain levels of educational background for the PRI functionaries at all the levels. PRI as an effective pressure group representing the interests of the village could work then better and on the other hand its delivery efficiency could also be better promoted.
- Provision of higher allocation of funds for PRI-initiated development activities is required in cognisance of number of works passed by the Gram Sabhas.
- Authority and power to execute work as per entitlement under constitutional provisions needs to be given to the PRIs without unwanted forceful play of power by higher ups (work diversion, fund diversion, beneficiary selection etc. need be done exclusively by PRIs whereas at present overriding powers are exercised by representatives and government authorities by superseding and encroaching upon the jurisdiction of PRIs of various levels. Without consideration of political party affiliations, elected PRIs must be given to exercise power and authority as due to them. Consultation and consideration to enlist decisions are required.
- Frequency and regularity of the Gram Sabha and content discussed at the Gram Sabha level to include more of the development problems and to ensure more and meaningful cooperation of the people required. (Rajya Meeting- General Meeting of the Villagers).
- Meeting should be held where GPM's submissions should be heard and given weightage for both consideration of works to be undertaken and funds to be allotted for the same with time limit reasonably given for completion of work.
- Appropriate coordination is required for development works for the village people to be effectively executed with the help of the office of the GPM.

Concluding Remarks: The introduction of the Panchayati Raj has brought about a significant change in the traditional village life of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. It has given a new orientation to politics in the state. Formation of an Arunachal civil society has become possible where representation of all tribes and communities has been kind of a natural event. The common villager has been better able for effective political participation while being integrated into a larger democratic governance structure.

It was in 1978 that electoral politics was first introduced in the state and the Assembly elections paved the way for the introduction of a modern participatory and representative government. The phase of socio-political development in the state is still in the process of evolution and is characterized by certain transitional trends such as: localized nature of leadership; minimal participation of women in governance; a strong tendency on the part of the opposition leadership to join the ruling party soon after the election and failure of any regional party to create a reasonable political base in the state (Talukdar and Tado, 1998). Introduction of modern participatory democracy, spread of education, improved means of communication, initiation of industrialization and increasingly people's participation-oriented structure of development administration have been responsible for the process of change and transition in the existing system of governance of Arunachal Pradesh. The

constraints that prevent the modern Panchayati Raj institution to contribute to the best of its potential as pointed out by the people and their elected representatives in the Panchayat bodies need to be noted carefully and addressed expeditiously through appropriate legislative or executive remedies. Then only in due course the performance of the Panchayati Raj bodies in the West Kameng district in particular and in the state of Arunachal Pradesh in general as also elsewhere in India could be ensured to effect the long awaited rural modernization and transformation of the backward and tribal areas to make the Gandhian dream of wiping every drop of tear from every eye realized by making people true and active participants in the project of happy and dignified existence everywhere across the country.

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